

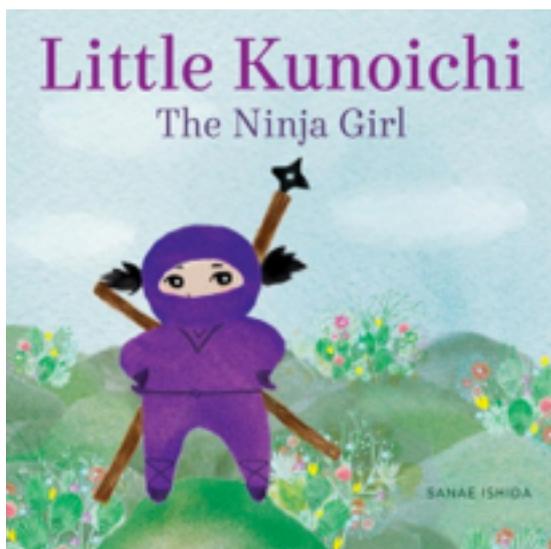
Little Kunoichi: The Ninja Girl

The Power of Perseverance and Friendship

Laura Davies, Engagement Partner, Chwarae Teg, Cardiff

When Laura Davies discovered a very special children's book, she knew she had to purchase it. What she didn't realise was that she would also have an opportunity to question its author directly.

At a recent visit to the gift shop in the National Museum of Wales, one title amongst all their children's books sang out to me as I walked past. A little girl clad in purple standing proud amongst a hilltop of wild flowers urged me to take a closer look. With my baby nestled on my hip, we both took a quick scan of this beautiful picture book and, just one page in, I knew this was an impulse purchase I was not going to be able to deny myself! The book was 'Little Kunoichi: The Ninja Girl' by Sanae Ishida.



It is Sanae Ishida's first published children's book. Both author and illustrator, Sanae's deft hand has interwoven the written word and imagery seamlessly and it is clear that both aspects are equally important in the telling of this story.

Little Kunoichi defies the stereotypes so often found in children's books; as a little ninja-girl-in-training she is strong and adventurous and her inquisitive spirit is infectious in this celebration of perseverance and friendship.

Little Kunoichi is joined on her quest to become a ninja by Chibi Samurai. Chibi is another delightful character who helps readers rejoice in the art of learning for pleasure and not just to reach a notion of 'perfection'. It would be a great story to share in a Philosophy for Children session or circle time, as it helps celebrate 'shugyo' which is described in the book as reaching for a goal which is '*better, not perfect. Practice and have fun*'.

This would be a great discussion for even a younger audience – discussing what it means to work hard, and to reach a sense of fulfilment. The book is full of humour and has a beguiling lightness of touch, and would appeal to a wide range of children (and adults!). There is lots to encourage more able readers who might enjoy the challenge of the bi-lingual aspect to this book (there is a Japanese fact-page at the back which elaborates on some of the notions referred to in the story), but it would be equally appealing to more visual learners as there is much to extrapolate from the bright and nuanced pictures and use of varying fonts and type-faces.

Such was my enjoyment of this book that I contacted the author (based in Seattle) to share my discovery with her: she was thrilled to hear that it had made its way all the way to Wales! I

was delighted when she also agreed to answer a few questions about what inspired her, and I hope you enjoy reading her answers as much as I did.

Q: *Little Kunoichi is your first children's book, what inspired you to write it and was it difficult to get that first story published?*

Sanae: I've always loved children's books and have harboured a secret goal to both write and illustrate my own since I was a little girl. *Little Kunoichi* is a much improved and better realised version of a story I started in my twenties, many many moons before I had a child. The original story had a character named Joja who travelled around imaginary worlds with her trusty pets: a flying alligator and a bald hedgehog. It was terrible. After the birth of my daughter and reading countless books to her, I realised I wanted to create a tale about a hard-working female protagonist that looked like her because I couldn't find any.

Getting the book published was actually embarrassingly easy due to a series of serendipitous events - however, I'd like to believe that I was prepared to be lucky because almost all of my so-called 'breaks' have been through relationships I had cultivated. I really love getting to know people. I had become friends with a bookseller who knew that I did some freelance illustration. When she acquired a job at a publishing company as the children's book editor-at-large, she thought of me and told me I seemed like a nice person to work with (plus she liked my illustrations). I think the moral of the story is: put your work out there and you never know who or what will lead you to opportunities so always keep an open mind and develop positive relationships. At least, that's the way I try to look at it.

Q: *How much would you say that your previous work (teaching English in Japan and studying for a degree in Educational Counselling) influenced the writing of this book?*

Sanae: My years in Japan influenced me a ton! My Japanese heritage is such a big part of my identity, but when I lived and taught English in Japan, I realised how very American I am. *Little Kunoichi* is a bit of a bridge between the two cultures that coexist inside of me. It's my retaliation against the ideal of perfection that I

see here in the Western world while encouraging the benefits of hard work toward but not necessarily reaching mastery (which is what the Japanese concept of shugyo is all about).

As for the educational counselling degree, that was a misguided move and I never went into the profession, but I did absorb a lot about different learning styles, communication and time management (many of the graduates went onto become school administrators). I don't know if I directly used the skills I gained from the program for the book, but I probably did unconsciously -- like the time management part.

Q: *The main characters of Kunoichi and Chibi are great examples of positive role models for children that break the usual gender stereotypes. Would you say this was a conscious decision or just an organic part of the story?*

Sanae: It was conscious. I didn't want to create a princess or fairy story. I read too many of those to my daughter and didn't want her growing up with that kind of aspiration.

Q: *As well as writing the story you also did the illustrations. How much did your passion for design, craft and illustration impact on the development of Little Kunoichi?*

Sanae: Actually, I drew the pictures first and the words came second. I'm much more visually driven even though I'm a voracious reader and have been keeping a daily journal for over 25 years. I saw the entire story in my mind, just like a movie reel, when my editor asked me to sketch out a storyboard for the book. It's fascinating to me that the final printed version has hardly changed from the initial thumbnail sketches. The book I'm currently working on has been totally different so I now know that it's not always like that.

Q: *I loved the inclusion of Japanese words which were an integral part of the story. How significant was this dual - language element to you?*

Sanae: I'm bilingual and I firmly believe that this shaped my personality and worldview in a lot of ways. I'm aware of certain concepts and ideologies that exist in Japanese that don't exist

in English and vice versa - I want to say that it makes me more flexible and open-minded, but who knows? I'm just weird. I knew from the start that I wanted to include the 'coda' as my editor called it with little factoids, because I love them when I see them in books!

Q: Which books did you love reading as a child, and are there any current children's authors that have particularly influenced you?

Sanae: As a child, I read more Japanese comic books than could be considered healthy. I remember spending entire summers camped out on the sofa with a towering stack of Japanese comic books and a bowl of green grapes. I don't know why I had to eat green grapes while reading, but I did. Around third grade, I started reading books in English outside of school assignments, and I had a keen love of teen horror and mysteries. Had Harry Potter been around in my childhood, I would have been obsessed. Speaking of which, JK Rowling is a huge hero, and although she's mostly an illustrator, I adore Carson Ellis. Her newest book *Home*, is her debut work as author/illustrator and it's beautiful.

Q: How much did your own daughter and your experience of motherhood shape the story of *Little Kunoichi*?

Sanae: My experience as a mother is inseparable from the formation of *Little Kunoichi*. These days, I feel like almost everything I do is for her (in a non-co-dependent way, I hope). I'm motivated to be a role model, to create material that I think would benefit and delight her, etc.

Q: Are there any plans to write more children's books and what advice would you give to budding children's authors?

Sanae: Yes! I'm plotting with my editor about the next children's book. However, I'm in the throes of finishing up my second book, 'Sewing Happiness', which is a beginner's sewing book with a memoir-istic element. It's meant for adults, though it's probably tween- and teen-friendly enough. It'll come out in Spring of 2016 so my focus is entirely on getting that completed.

I don't feel qualified to give advice, but my own guiding motto is: "be myself, work on improving a little every day and be patient."

Magical things have happened as a result.

Book details

Little Kunoichi: The Ninja Girl (ages 3 – 7) by Sanae Ishida, ISBN 9781570619540. Price: £12.99 (UK)